



SPECIAL REPORT
ON
INTERFERENCE IN FOREIGN MISSIONS,

BY

GEORGE W. WOOD, D. D.





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INTERFERENCE IN MISSIONS.

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SPECIAL REPORT

PRESENTED AT THE MEETING OF THE

AMERICAN BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

FOR

FOREIGN MISSIONS,

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BY GEORGE W. WOOD, D. D.

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At the Annual Meeting of the American Board, held at Pittsfield, Mass., in September, 1866, Secretary Wood, in behalf of the Prudential Committee, presented a Special Report upon the subject of interference by one Foreign Missionary Society with the operations of another, in the prosecution of their work among the unevangelized. Though this Report was now called for by, and has special reference to, certain recent movements, it is upon a subject in regard to which correct views, and a judicious, courteous, and truly Christian course of conduct, on the part of all who are engaged in this missionary work, must ever be of great importance. The Report, and the action taken by the Board in connection with it, are presented on the following pages.

SPECIAL REPORT ON INTERFERENCE IN FOREIGN MISSIONS.

It is deemed expedient to lay before the Board, at this time, a brief historic recital, and a re-statement of the views of the Prudential Committee touching interference of different Missionary Societies and Boards with each other, in conducting their operations.

Thirty-three years ago, the Committee reported that instructions had been forwarded to the Sandwich Islands to arrest the establishment, previously sanctioned, of a mission at the Washington Islands, as it had been ascertained that the London Missionary Society regarded that group as within their proper field, and wished to occupy it. This announcement was accompanied with the declaration, that, "it is contrary to their [the Prudential Committee's] general principles to interfere with other missionary societies." The Board gave its approval to that action and affirmation.

Four years later, in 1837, in reporting on the mission then just commenced at Singapore, the Committee expressed the judgment that Singapore, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, and similar commercial ports, being "the natural entrances to great fields of missionary labor," must "necessarily be, to some extent, common ground" to different societies; that is, as was explained, so far as to allow these societies' having printing establishments, and what might be necessary to make them effective, together with liberty, at the same time, to perform all kinds of missionary labor "within reasonable territorial bounds." The Board concurred in this sentiment, and adopted the following resolution:

"Resolved. That the Board contemplate with fraternal interest the efforts of evangelical missionary societies existing both in this country and in Europe, to extend the knowledge of the Gospel of Christ among the heathen, and will endeavor to promote the best understanding, at home and abroad, between their agents and missionaries and our own."

At the next annual meeting (in 1838) a paper from the Prudential Committee was read to the Board by the Foreign Secretary, on the subject of interference in missions. It gave an extract from a letter received from the London Missionary Society, which cordially endorsed the principles stated in the Report of 1837, and suggested that societies should furnish seasonable information to each other

concerning their plans, which might affect the interests of others. The omission to correspond with that Society concerning the contemplated mission at Singapore, the Committee stated was an inadvertence, and they added : "That Society preceded us at Singapore, and our going there at all is justified only in view of its being one of the great marts of commerce, which, for the present, must be common ground." The avoidance of interference with others in adopting new plans was set forth as of vital importance. To accomplish this it was suggested, 1. That each Society claim only such territory as it might have a reasonable prospect of occupying without long delay, and well cultivating. 2. That "certain of the great centres of human society and marts of commerce" be regarded as open to all, with such a "sectional division," and other arrangements, as will be for the harmony and mutual advantage of the missions sent to them. 3. That elsewhere the different societies should scrupulously respect the *territorial limits* of each other's operations in heathen lands. 4. When any large section of the missionary field is occupied by one society, another society contemplating operations within its bounds should, in the first instance, communicate with the society already in the field. The Board adopted a series of resolutions affirming the views thus expressed, and directed the Prudential Committee to correspond with other societies, as they might think proper, for the purpose of securing a satisfactory understanding among them.

This was twenty-eight years ago. Then, and previously, it was a cardinal principle with this Board to avoid injuring the interests of any class of evangelical Christians who sought, under whatever forms of worship and church order, to spread the saving knowledge of Christ among the heathen, or complete a work of evangelization which they had well begun. That principle the Board has adhered to since. The Committee are not aware that a complaint of intrusion has been or can be urged against any of its missions. In India, (excepting, lately, Madras,) and Ceylon; in Africa, and Persia, and Turkey, and Syria, and Greece; in Oceanica, and among Indian Tribes on this continent, its missions are in distinct and well defined fields, which they entered when unoccupied, and which they cultivate, in general, as fully as is done by any other missionary agencies under similar conditions. Preceded in China only by the London Society, the American Board has rejoiced to work in harmony with others who have followed it in the ports opened to Christian labor, and now desires to see separate fields taken possession of by different missionary bodies, as Divine providence may permit, for the Christianization of the vast interior of that empire.

The Committee are happy to testify that the principle of non-interference is generally acknowledged, and seldom infringed, by

evangelical missionary agencies in the foreign work. The Earl of Shaftesbury has spoken of it as "the received principle of missionary operations." In accordance with it, the American Board and English societies operating in the Pacific Ocean, have agreed on boundaries there; the Church and London Societies have done the same for Madagascar; various societies the same in Africa and India. In conformity with it, the London Society, in 1835, declined to receive Mr. Rhenius, and other excellent missionaries of the Church Society, who left the service of the latter in Madras, and sought to come under the patronage of the former, which had a mission in the adjoining province of Travancore. Thus the American Board and the American Methodist Episcopal Society divide between them the Bulgarian field in Turkey; and the Church Missionary Society has refused to listen to urgent solicitations to enter among the Armenians, either in the provinces or the capital. When, less than three years ago, strong appeals were made by members of the Church of England, for aid to be extended to a company of converts in Constantinople, who, with an able pastor at their head, had withdrawn from connection with the American mission, and pleaded conscientious convictions in favor of an Episcopal "Reformed Armenia" movement, the Committee of that great and noble society, after mature deliberation, unanimously declared "that the Church Missionary Society could not give" the desired "countenance or support, as it would be an unjustifiable interference with the great and good work for so many years carried on by the American Board of Missions in Turkey, with the manifest blessing of the God of missions." The return, soon afterwards, of the disaffected party to cordial relations with the mission of this Board, and other subsequent developments, attest the wisdom as well as Christian courtesy and justice of that decision.

The sentiment adverse to interference, and favorable to the division of fields and arrangements of agencies necessary to prevent it, has, on the whole, gained strength in late years. Exceptions to this statement are presented by two classes which bear the Christian name. The first consists of the missionary propagandists of the Church of Rome. These, claiming that that church is the only repository of truth and salvation for the world, are justified by their principles in following us, as they do with persistent zeal, wherever we go among the heathen, and seizing, so far as they can, the fruits of Protestant labor and expenditure. Their position is frankly avowed. They assert a right to oppose and despoil our work, and we meet them as we do Pagan, Mohammedan, and other open enemies to it.

Recent events indicate that a similar policy is likely to be pursued by the highly ritualistic portions of the Protestant Episcopal Church. These appear to be far more in sympathy with the Church of Rome

than with non-prelatic, evangelical Christians, and increasingly animated by its spirit. In a late instance, which is yet happily without a parallel in the history of Protestant missions, an aggression from that source has been made on a field of small dimensions, occupied by this Board for more than forty years, and at least as thoroughly and successfully cultivated as any field of like character and equal extent has been by any missionary agency in the world. The distinguished missionary, Dr. Duff, of the Free Church of Scotland, in a speech in 1853, deprecated the entrance of any two denominations into the same field ; and, pleading that none, for example, should intrude upon the Baptists in the Orissa province in India, or on the London Society in Travancore, or the Church of England Societies in Tinnevelly, because of "the complete pre-occupation" thus effected of those territories, he said ; "I would as soon leap into the Ganges as venture to go near Tinnevelly, except as a brother, to see the good work that is going on." Not such are the views of the supporters of the new mission which has been planted in a field in which the missionary force, compared with the numbers of the people, was eighteen times greater, and the converts brought to the Lord's table were more than thirty fold a larger proportion of the population than in the province which Dr. Duff considered a possession sacred to those who had undertaken its Christian culture. If objections are valid to efforts on the same ground when there is a desire of simply fraternal co-operation, what shall be thought of an invasion of direct proselytism ; and when, instead of an endeavor to build up and help extend Christian organizations previously founded, war is made upon them, and it is proclaimed that what has been done by the first evangelizers in the field is to be regarded merely as preparing the way for the invaders to come in, with a not concealed intent to gain, if possible, the whole land to themselves.* To say nothing of the magnanimity of such policy, we are constrained to ask : Is it Christian ?

"Successors of the Apostles," in the work of establishing the church of Christ among the heathen, have for their guidance the example of the Apostles. Did not the great Missionary to the Gentiles give us the true missionary principle in his choice of fields and methods of labor ? His testimony concerning himself was : "Yea, so have I strived to preach the Gospel, not where Christ was named lest I should build upon another man's foundation. But as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see ; and they that have not heard shall understand." Unhappily, it is not yet difficult to find accessible portions of the world in which the name of

* "We owe them (the first missionaries) many thanks for having prepared the way for us by familiarizing the people with these mighty truths."—*Past. Address by Bishop Staley, Honolulu*, p. 11.

Christ is not heard, or where the truths which are essential to salvation are not understood. The Bishop of London recently observed, in a public speech : " It has been urged that there is a general law of comity in these matters which should prevent any missionary body from trespassing upon the fields of labor of others—a law which I fully recognize, because I feel that heathenism is wide enough, and there is room for all, without interfering with one another, to labor in some different portion of the field."

Interference, then, is unnecessary. All the followers of Christ can take part in spreading the Gospel without interfering with one another. Economy, and the best results, require the choice of separate fields ; for the light is most diffused when kindled at many centres. Friction in this way is avoided. The collisions of rivalry on the same ground produce deplorable effects. The temptation to turn aside from a field of hard, and as yet unrewarded labor, and ~~so~~ to reap fruits of others' toil, or at least work on soil which others have found more productive, is often very strong ; but this cannot be justified. Such encroachment is felt as a wrong by the previous workers ; and it is well if they do not show human infirmity in resenting it. The trespassers on others' inclosures are under a dangerous inducement, in defending their aggression, to deprecate and misrepresent the character and labors of those whom they thus injure. How else shall we account for the efforts to bring reproach upon the mission of this Board at the Hawaiian Islands, by the retailing of old, exploded calumnies, by gentlemen whose love of truth we would not impeach, and even by high dignitaries of a Christian church ? Surely, nothing but the exigencies of a false position, opening the ear to testimony unworthy of credit, could lead to the utterance, by such lips, of statements utterly at variance with facts that are incontestable, and some of which are known to the world. By this means the enemies of Christian missions are made to rejoice, and their friends in all Christendom caused to mourn.

But more to be deprecated still are the legitimate effects of such an aggression on native converts, and the people at large. Its influence may be, and in the particular instance above referred to it seems likely to be, by God's grace, overruled for good ; but still much evil must arise. Churches composed of babes in Christ, with the little knowledge and moral strength which converts from heathenism must be expected to possess, are easily desolated and rent by contentions. It was so in the churches founded by the Apostles. Two opposing ecclesiastical systems cannot, without great harm, be presented in rivalry before such communities. Bishop Selwyn, the faithful occupant of the English Episcopal See in New Zealand, declared himself against such a presentation even when there may be the utmost

charity among the missionaries, and said : " We make a rule never to introduce controversy among a native people, or to impair the simplicity of their faith. If the fairest openings for missionary effort lie before us, yet if the ground has been pre-occupied by any other religious body, we forbear to enter."

This declaration of Bishop Selwyn, honorable to himself and the church which he represented, implies an acknowledgment that openings to missionary enterprise may invite an entrance where the ground is really pre-occupied. No field is so fully cultivated but that other laborers may find work to do therein. Invitations to enter may be extended by parties in it. There is often little difficulty in procuring such invitations, if an ear is ready to be given to them. There are always secular interests to be promoted, and selfish ends to be gained. Disaffection towards their missionary guides may sometimes occur, on personal grounds ; or there may be restiveness under a pressure necessary to the healthful development of the nascent Christian communities in self-support and self-government. Sympathy with something new in doctrine or forms may show itself among the people, or on the part of their civil rulers. But none of these things can justify the introduction of religious strife into such fields as are here spoken of. To do no more than turn away the minds of weak and unstable converts to questions of differences in ecclesiastical polity, modes of worship, and doctrinal peculiarities, when their interest ought to be concentrated on the simple saving truths of the Gospel, and the building up of institutions yet in their infancy, is to do great harm. This is aggravated when native agents are drawn away, and churches are tempted by offers of increased pecuniary help ; and discipline is rendered more difficult by receiving to communion, and perhaps also employment, persons who fall under church censure administered according to the principles of the religious body in previous possession of the ground. If such competitions should ever be allowed to arise, ought they not to be adjourned at least until the accessible wastes of heathenism are more largely inclosed, and sufficient time has been granted for growth of ability to meet the shock ?

Each of the several ecclesiastical systems is, in the eyes of its advocates, more scriptural and excellent than any other ; and its universal prevalence is to them a proper object of desire. A particular mission may not be conducted in the best manner ; or, however conducted, it may yield unsatisfactory results. But does any such consideration annul the evident dictate of Christian wisdom and duty, that the disciples of Christ, who are brought under equal responsibility and endowed with equal rights, by the command addressed equally to all, to " go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature," should so shape their action as not to embarrass and hinder one another in obeying it ?

The argument from alleged defects and want of success is one liable always to be controverted. It is by no means available only to those who have lately chosen to make it their defense for a course of action which is visited with the condemnation of the great body of evangelical Christians throughout the world. If we were to imitate an unworthy example, the discredit of which belongs alone to the individuals who have furnished or sanctioned it, it would be easy to make out a similar justification for our going, with what we could plausibly claim to be our better ecclesiastical polity and methods of missionary working, into a field long possessed by the Church of England; for in no field cultivated by a mission of the American Board have such lamentable developments been witnessed, on which a charge of grievous missionary failure might, with much appearance of truth, be founded, as have recently occurred in New Zealand, in one of the most successful of the missions of that Church. But God forbid that we should thus aggravate an affliction which calls forth our deepest sympathy, and in which we see no just ground for impeaching the fidelity or worth of the agency employed.

In conclusion, the following affirmations are submitted to the consideration of the Board:

1. The Apostolic rule of proclaiming the Gospel where its sound has not been heard, not building on other men's foundations and boasting in a line of things made ready to our hands, is one to be acknowledged as in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel, honorable to the Christian name, and of the highest expediency in conducting foreign missions.

2. For different denominations of evangelical Christians to operate upon the same heathen or unevangelized people, or among the same people just emerging into the light of a saving Christianity, is earnestly to be deprecated, as unnecessary to a full scope for missionary exertion, an uneconomical distribution of missionary agencies, embarrassing in the carrying out of wise and necessary measures of missionary policy, endangering rivalry and conflict of interests between the missions by effects produced on native helpers, schools, congregations and churches belonging to each, and sometimes leading to distracting and otherwise injurious controversies between the missions and their friends and supporters respectively.

3. With the partial exception of certain great centres of population, and commercial ports which, being natural entrances to different inland fields, should to a certain extent be considered common ground, wherever missions labor among a people speaking the same language, they ought to confine themselves within well defined geographical dividing lines; and native converts educated by one mission, employed by it, perhaps ordained to the ministry by it, should not be

taken into employment by another mission without the cheerful consent of the one from which they come ; since the contrary course, especially if higher wages are also given, works strongly against the desirable end of raising up vigorous, self-governing, self-supporting, native Christian communities.

4. All evangelical missions and their supporters ought so to rise above partisan feeling, whether it be "sectarian" or "churchly," as to cherish a spirit of unity and brotherly love towards one another, each rejoicing in the success of every other, and instead of disparaging and hindering others, each doing what is consistent with truth to sustain the entire body of evangelical missions in the good opinion of the Christian Church and of the world.

This paper was referred to a Special Committee, consisting of Dr. William A. Stearns, Hon. William E. Dodge, Dr. William Patton, Joseph S. Ropes, Esq., Dr. S. H. Marsh, Rev. C. C. Parker, and Rev. S. R. Dennen. This Committee subsequently reported as follows :—

The Committee on the Report read by one of the Secretaries, Rev. Dr. Wood, entitled "Interference in Foreign Missions," have considered the Report as fully as their limited time would allow. It is in their judgment, a clear, eminently Christian and satisfactory exhibition of principles and considerations on the subject to which it relates, necessary to be put forth at this time, and adapted to meet the views, not only of this Board, but of all intelligent and unprejudiced Christians.

Protestant Christianity is sustained by numerous denominations. It is impossible to unite them at present, and equally impossible for any person, or class, to belong to them all. We must necessarily work, if we work at all, in the organizations with which we are specially connected.

If the several organizations which agree in most of the great principles of the Gospel, and have essentially the same spirit, will make common cause in the conversion of the world, we may, notwithstanding our diversities, expect rapid progress to be made in the destruction of heathenism, and in that renewal of the race which the Scriptures foretell. But if we spend our strength in contending with each other, in proselyting from each other, and in attempting to do over each other's work, even though we may think we might do it better, we shall both fail in our main object, and bring the cause of missions and the religion of Christ into contempt. It is as true of churches as of individuals, and as true now as it was eighteen hundred years ago, that, "if we bite and devour one another, we shall be consumed one of another."

Now we have numerous Missionary Associations which desire to have an efficient part in the conversion of the world. The constituency which sustains them is loyal to Christ, and feels pressed by his last command and by the condition of perishing man, to preach his Gospel to every creature. Each organization prefers, of course, its own methods ; but can any one of them believe it a duty, or afford to set the others aside, or throw hindrances in their way ? Interference of the kind here contemplated would seem to proceed on such a presumption. But if not, nothing could tend more to dishearten and paralyze the energies of God's people in one denomination, than to have their work overthrown, or liable to be overthrown, by another.

The friends of missions are deeply grieved, not to say indignant, and we wonder not at the sensation which has been manifested in this Board, in view of the course taken by certain ecclesiastical officials in reference to the Sandwich Islands. Is all the rest of the world converted ? Are there no dark spots on which even the highest of high-church missions can throw the first rays of light ? Or must we understand that there are forms of Christianity which have no evangelizing power till other missionaries "have prepared the way, by familiarizing the people with these mighty truths?" Even on this supposition, would not Christian wisdom demand that such laborers should spend their strength against the old and established churches, rather than to throw elements of contention into Christ's feeble folds ?

"Take heed that ye offend not one of these little ones." "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." "Whosoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." To say nothing of those old commandments,—"Thou shalt not bear false witness," and "Thou shalt not covet,"—should not these and such like exhortations of Scripture assist us in settling questions like that which is before us ?

We would not, however, even seem to censure, without discrimination. We are happy to believe, that courses of action such as we here condemn are not approved by English Christians generally, nor by most of those members of the Church of England who might most naturally be expected to sustain them. The noble sentiments expressed by Dr. Duff, Bishop Selwyn, the Bishop of London, and other devoted servants of Christ, in different ecclesiastical connections, will doubtless be accepted by this Board with fraternal appreciation, and as worthy to be acted on by all bodies of evangelizing Christians. They are in accordance with the sentiments of the Board, put forth more than thirty years ago, namely, that "it is contrary to their general principles to interfere with other missionary societies,"—a doctrine from which it has never knowingly departed.

While we believe that our American missions have been successful almost beyond a parallel, we confess that no churches on earth, or measures to establish them, since the times of the Apostles, have ever risen above the possibilities of criticism. We invite observation, we accept free remark. From the enemies of missions we expect misapprehension and false statements. But we cannot accept calumnies from the professed friends of Christ without obeying his injunction, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him."

Christian frankness requires us to say, that these last remarks have been called forth by unjust and injurious statements made by Bishop Staley and others associated with him, respecting our mission at the Sandwich Islands. We are willing, however, to presume, in charity, that they were made under the influence of wrong information, or proceeded from a condition of mind not adapted to clear perceptions of the truth. Indeed we have reason to believe that the Bishop himself has acknowledged, in private circles, that the representations by which we are aggrieved had not the foundation in fact which he had supposed when they were put forth. If this be so, Christian manliness requires that they should be as publicly retracted as they were publicly made; while the advancement of Christ's kingdom demands that all attempts at missionary interference should be abandoned.

In conclusion, your committee recommend for your adoption the following resolutions;—

1. *Resolved*, That we approve of the sentiments expressed in the paper read by Dr. Wood, and of the closing affirmations submitted in it to our consideration, and do heartily adopt the same as an expression of our views in relation to the subject of "Interference in Foreign Missions."

2. *Resolved*, That, in accordance with the Report, we rejoice in the success of all Evangelical Missions, by whatever denomination they are sustained, and do cheerfully accord them all the freedom in Christian labor which we ask for ourselves; but against any "interference of one denomination with the missionary work of another"—at least till the conversion of the world is much further advanced than it is likely to be in our day—we do hereby record our most solemn PROTEST.

We also recommend, that the Report read by Dr. Wood be printed, not only with the minutes of this meeting, but separately; and that copies of it be sent, under the direction of the Prudential Committee, as far as possible, to all centres of missionary influence, and especially to all Evangelical Missionary Societies, in this country and throughout the world.

This report was accepted, and the resolutions were adopted by the Board.

